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Mr. Robot and American Masculinity

What does it mean to “be a man” in America? And does it mean something different to be a man in America today than it did in 1985? Or 1945? The question is divisive by nature, but the numbers suggest that the nature of masculinity in America is shifting. To take one particular statistic as a proxy, Pew Research Center reported in 2014 that in America, “The number of fathers who are at home with their children for any reason has nearly doubled since 1989.” Though we have to be careful about drawing conclusions from a single statistic, the fact that an increasing number of men are taking over a societal role traditionally reserved for women seems like a strong indication that some kind of change is occurring. Similarly, in his article, “The End of Violent, Simplistic, Macho Masculinity,” Thomas McBee argues that in America, a new kind of “healthy masculinity” – more open to emotion and gender equality – is emerging. In that same article, McBee interviews Michael Kimmel, a professor of sociology at Stony Brook University and the author of *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*. Drawing on his interview with Kimmel, McBee writes, “Generation Y men do more housework and are more involved fathers than any generation in American history. They also have more cross-sex friendships, which Kimmel suggests means that young men see women increasingly as true peers—equals—in life and work” (McBee). Yet despite what the numbers say, Kimmel points out that “If you look at survey data you would find that most men in America today still subscribe largely to the ideology of masculinity that was the dominant ideology when I was younger, when my dad was younger”. Thus, Kimmel argues, “I think you’re witnessing a disjunction between what we grew up thinking it means to be a man and the lives we’re actually living and want to live” (McBee).

*Mr. Robot,* a drama centered on a group of anarchist hackers who try to topple the global banking industry, tackles the dichotomy McBee discusses in his article via two of its main characters: Elliot and Tyrell. Elliot and Tyrell each embody a particular masculine archetype— Tyrell is a hard-driving, ambitious, self-centered businessman, while Elliot is an antisocial, misanthropic hacking wunderkind. Both characters embody the disjunction McBee describes: both buy into the need to act “like a man” by presenting themselves to the world traditionally masculine ways, despite the fact that their actual views on masculinity are non-traditional. Through them, Mr. Robot’s showrunners make the case that not only is masculinity and America changing, but that the path to success for modern American men lies in moving away from traditional masculinity and embracing non-traditional roles.

Despite the fact that Elliot and Tyrell represent different strikingly different kinds of masculine archetypes, both characters share one personality trait: they both feel a strong need to present themselves in a traditionally masculine way. In Tyrell’s case, this need manifests itself via his appearance: we see in this episode how he flaunts symbols of wealth and success like suits, watches, and designer ties. Elliot seems at first glance not to feel this same need; he eschews the traditional trappings of wealth, professing his distaste for capitalism and materialism. However, as the episode progresses, the audience discovers that, as Matthew Giles writes in his review of the episode, “the third episode of *Mr. Robot*, the USA Netword’s hacker drama with surging ratings, is all about the weaknesses we hide from others. Elliot Alderson, played brilliantly by Rami Malek, calls them ‘bugs’” (Giles). As Elliot describes to the audience his philosophy on these “bugs” he reveals that while he doesn’t focus on displays of wealth in power in the way Tyrell does, he still feels the same need as Tyrell to present himself outwardly in a masculine way. The difference is that in Elliot’s case, that need manifests in an obsession with weakness, or more specifically, the need to hide his weaknesses, as he perceives them, from others.

That need Elliot expresses to hide his vulnerabilities is one of three traditionally hegemonic masculine behaviors that Sharon Bird identifies in her essay entitled, “Welcome to the Men’s Club: Homosociality and the Maintenance of Hegemonic Masculinity.” In that same essay, Bird describes the process by which “hegemonic masculinity is maintained as the norm to which men are held accountable despite individual conceptualizations of masculinity that depart from the norm.” According to Bird, homosocial interactions between heterosexual men sustain hegemonic masculinity norms by supporting identities that fit hegemonic ideals and suppressing non-hegemonic masculine identities. More specifically, she writes that, “Three of the shared meanings that are perpetuated via male homosociality are emotional detachment, competition, and the sexual objectification of women.”

As we look at how Elliot and Tyrell achieve, or sometime fail to achieve, their goals through the lens of Bird’s article, the episode’s message becomes more clear. At the very beginning of the episode, we’re presented with an American Pyscho-esque scene in which Tyrell prepares for a meeting with his company’s CEO, during which he intends to advocate for his own promotion. In this scene, Tyrell seems to embody several masculine ideals: he’s handsome, wealthy, and ambitious. Thus, the audience is set up to expect his success. Instead, in the following scene between Tyrell and his boss, Tyrell falls on his face. It turns out that Tyrell’s boss has already filled the position Tyrell wants, and he dismisses Tyrell out of hand, embarrassing him in front of several other employees. This scene subverts the audience’s expectations by presenting Tyrell as the embodiment of traditional masculinity and then immediately having his ambitions thwarted. With the context provided by the rest of the episode, the audience can see that Tyrell is, as Alex McCown writes in his review of the episode, a “tightly wound, stressed-out, insecure man,” despite the way he presents himself. Instead of finding success in the ways the audience is conditioned to expect in the episode’s opening scene (by being forceful, authoritative, and “manly”), as the episode progresses, Tyrell is able to advance his schemes by moving away from traditionally masculine behaviors. Specifically, he advances his plot to ascend the corporate ladder by sleeping with his boss’s (male) secretary and bugging the man’s phone, allowing him access to confidential company data. By sleeping with another man to advance his schemes, Tyrell does two things: First, he moves away from the homosocial, heterosexual space that, as Bird explains, promotes hegemonic masculinity. And second, instead of sexually objectifying women, which as Bird explains, “facilitates self-conceptualization as positively male by distancing the self from all that is associated with being female,” he does the opposite, allowing his own body to be objectified by another man. It’s only then, once he moves away from traditionally hegemonic masculine behavior, that he’s able to accomplish his goals.

In a manner similar to Tyrell, Elliot’s able to achieve success in this episode by moving away from hegemonic masculine behaviors. Throughout the episode, Elliot bemoans his isolation— he may be a misanthrope, but he’s not a happy one. As his narration increasingly makes clear, he longs for human connection, but can’t achieve it, due to his fear that someone will discover his weaknesses. He shuts everyone in his life out—friends, family, even his therapist—for fear that they’ll discover his “bugs”. Bird points out that this behavior is strongly associated with traditional, hegemonic masculinity, writing, “emotional detachment (i.e. withholding expressions of intimacy) maintains clear individual identity boundaries (Chodorow 1978) and the norms of hegemonic masculinity. To express feelings is to reveal vulnerabilities and weaknesses; to withhold such expressions is to maintain control (Cancian 1987)” (Bird 122). Tellingly, Elliot achieves a moment of human connection in this episode when he describes his feelings of isolation to Shayla, his neighbor, only to discover that she harbors similar feelings. It’s important that Elliot’s only able to break down his sense of isolation when he’s able to overcome his fear that someone might discover a weakness and open up to emotionally. As with Tyrell, there are two points worth noting: first, that Elliot accomplishes the goal that he sets out for himself at the beginning of the episode (to overcome his isolation) when he’s alone with Shayla, away from the homosocial spaces that dominate much of his work and personal life. And second, that he achieves a breakthrough by breaking away from traditional, hegemonic masculine behavior by revealing his feelings of isolation and insecurity. Elliot’s experience mirrors Tyrell’s— only when he escapes from a homosocial context and abandons hegemonic masculine behaviors is he able to progress.

Mr. Robot’s showrunners don’t just agree with Thomas McBee and Michael Kimmel’s idea that there exists, “a disjunction between what we grew up thinking it means to be a man and the lives we’re actually living and want to live”— they go one step further. By ensuring that their male protagonists only achieve their goals by moving away from homosocial spaces and rejecting the traditional hegemonic masculinity those spaces promote, the show’s architects argue that for the modern American man, success – whether personal or professional – is achieved by rejecting traditional masculinity and embracing non-hegemonic identities.

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